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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000497

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SUBJECT: (U) KURDISH POLITICIAN MAHMUD OTHMAN: KIRKUK IS  
THE LITMUS TEST

REF: BAGHDAD 443

Classified By: Political Counselor Robert S.  
Ford for Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Kurdish government formation negotiating team member Dr. Mahmud Othman told PolOffs on February 15 that he stood by his comments in Al Dustour newspaper calling on Prime Minister-elect Ja'afari to commit publicly to resolving the Kirkuk issue. On Ja'afari nomination, Othman suggested that while the KDP was not as unhappy with the nomination as Talabani, both Kurdish parties were emphasizing that Ja'afari only had one month to form a government, or he'll lose his position. "In that scenario, it's not certain that the Shia Coalition would get another chance to choose the candidate," he asserted. When asked for an alternate choice, Othman replied that Allawi is obviously the next choice. By taking this issue public before the negotiations for government positions are really underway, the Kurds are reminding the Shia and Sunni Arabs parties that they are an essential party to the eventual government formation deal. They also aim to ensure that the Kurds get some kind of resolution on a key redline issue for their constituents while the Kurds still hold great influence over the negotiating process. End Summary.

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(U) Need Progress on Kirkuk  
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¶2. (U) Kurdish government formation negotiating team member Dr. Mahmud Othman told PolOffs on February 15 that he stood by his comments in Al Dustour newspaper calling on Prime Minister-elect Ja'afari to commit publicly to resolving the Kirkuk issue in accordance with the TAL's Article 58 and the new Constitution. There is a commission in Kirkuk that is creating a plan and a proposed budget. The Kurds will need to work out a formula with other political leaders to ensure Ja'afari will abide by his promises, he added. This time, the Kurds will want guarantees.

¶3. (C) When pressed on how exactly the Kurds would enforce this agreement when a similar plan in January 2005 had failed, however, Othman had no response. He merely repeated that this time, the Kurds were serious. Othman then reported that senior Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) leader Dr. Fuad Masum was currently working on a Government Plan that would include a specific timetable on Kirkuk.

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(U) Negotiations Progressing Slowly  
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14. (C) The Kurds were busily meeting with all political parties everyday, said Othman. The Kurdish negotiating team had met with some Sunni leaders and former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi's list on February 14. The problem is that no one would reach out to the others. The Shia and Sunni Arabs are squabbling. In addition, the Sadrists are blackballing Allawi's participation. The Kurds are the only ones speaking to all sides, and "we can get nowhere like this," averred Othman.

15. (C) Othman recommended some Sunni Arab leaders for consideration for key positions in the new government. Adnan al-Dulaymi, for example, was better than any of the others, he said. Other good choices were Tariq al-Hashimi, Ayad Samarra, Saleh Mutlak, and Sa'adun al-Dulaymi. Mahmud al-Mashadani, on the other hand, had acted badly when he recently visited Kurdistan. Othman reported that, although Mashadani is a medical doctor like himself and therefore educated, he refused to work with any Christians because they are "kafir," or "infidels." Othman recounted that one day after the meeting, everyone went in to lunch. As they sat down for the meal, he leaned over and said loudly to Mashadani, "You can't partake of this lunch - it was prepared and organized by the KRG-Erbil Deputy Prime Minister - a Christian. Surely you wouldn't eat a meal prepared by a kafir?" Othman said with satisfaction that Mashadani had had the grace to

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look ashamed, and that during the Kurdish meeting with the Sunni Arabs on February 14 Mashadani had been more reasonable.

16. (C) On Ja'afari nomination, Othman suggested that the Prime Minister position is not yet fixed. While the KDP was not as unhappy with the nomination as Talabani, both Kurdish parties were emphasizing that Ja'afari only had one month to form a government, otherwise he'd lose his position. "In that scenario, it's not certain that the Shia Coalition would get another chance to choose the candidate," he stated. When asked for an alternate choice, Othman replied that Allawi is obviously the next choice.

17. (C) As for the Kurds, there are still some internal divisions there. The PUK Politburo flew down to Baghdad February 11-13 for discussions with Masud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). The KDP, in return for supporting Talabani as President, wanted to hold both the Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister positions. This would effectively bar senior PUK Politburo member and current Planning Minister Barham Saleh from holding a key ministry portfolio in the new government. (COMMENT: This is not only reflective of the KDP's increasing discomfort with the PUK's higher national government profile, but what appears to be a personal dislike of Saleh by senior KDP officials like Masrur Barzani. See reftel. END COMMENT.) This intra-Kurd division was unfortunate, said Othman, because the KDP and PUK programs looked essentially alike - this was just a clash of personalities, rather than real differences, said Othman sadly.

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(U) Iraq is Moving Backwards  
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18. (C) Othman railed against the stricter social rules governing women now in Iraq. Iraq is entering a period of "social terrorism." Othman said he for one was not willing to accept political freedom at the expense of social freedom. In addition to federalism, democracy, and human rights, freedom and liberty for both men and women are crucial. In Najaf and Karbala, for example, women were not allowed to wear brightly colored clothes; only black or other dark colors were allowed. Many intellectuals, technocrats, and other secular people were fleeing Iraq, said Othman. A look at any of the universities and organizations showed significant "braindrain." The decreasing educational opportunities, in addition to the stricter clothing regulations, are driving many females away from education, warned Othman.

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(U) Comment  
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19. (C) While many Iraqi political groups have acknowledged that the Constitutionally mandated agreement on Kirkuk should be implemented, the issue is so politically sensitive that it has consistently been pushed off. The Constitution does state, however, that a referendum should be held no later than December 31, 2007 on the future status of Kirkuk. Before that referendum is held, a number of things should be completed: normalization of Kirkuk, including Iraq Property Claims Commission hearings on property confiscated during the Saddam Hussein years and resolving conflicting claims by the Arabization Arabs, and an accurate census. By taking this issue public before the negotiations for government positions are really underway, the Kurds are reminding the Shia and Sunni Arabs parties that the Kurds are a force to reckon with in the negotiations on ministry positions. Raising Kirkuk publicly like Othman did also helps the Kurds pressure for some kind of resolution on a key redline for their constituents while they still hold great influence over the negotiations.

KHALILZAD